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NEWS

Female prisoners seeking reform of prison, paroles

State inmates seek change from cells in Louisiana lockup

By CARLA CROWDER
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Alabama female prisoners locked in a rural Louisiana prison are demanding changes they say could give them a fair shot at parole and curb the state's reliance on private, for-profit lockups.

Women at the South Louisiana Correctional Center, some of whom have been housed 600 miles from their families for years, wrote a Platform for Reform. The two-page document includes reasons for

concerns and five demands they think would improve their chances for getting parole and leading productive lives.

"We know we've changed, and we can make a difference if we have a chance," inmate Phyllis Richey, 44, who is from Muscle Shoals, said from the Basile La.., for help where she has been since October.

"Because of crowding in state prisons, Alabama so far has paid private companies more than \$12 million to house prisoners in other states."

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Female prisoners seek reform

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end to the "heinous crime" designation that prevents some of them from working outside the prison and a chance to face their victims as well as the parole board.

The move to the Louisiana prison, 475 miles from Montgomery, makes it difficult or impossible for families to visit, the inmates said. Surrounded by rice fields, the prison has no classes, programs or rehabilitation groups, the opportunities prisoners rely on to show the parole board they have worked to better themselves.

"Down here, the time is not constructive. We have nothing to do. We're basically housed in that," it, said Richey, who helped draft the platform. She is serving a life sentence for murder, which occurred while she was driving drunk.

The prison is run by the Louisiana State Penitentiary, a company that plans to operate Alabama's first private prison.

Reason for denial

Like Richey, most of the women in Louisiana are serving

long sentences for violent crimes. Many of them have been turned down for parole before.

The board is not required to give a reason for the denial, which the inmates said leaves them with no guidance about what to do better. They want the board to set criteria for granting paroles.

Parole Board Assistant Executive Director Cynthia Dillard said the board has rules setting out when parole hearings can be set but no guarantees of parole.

"It's totally discretionary, the board has to believe they are not a risk to reoffend, and they have to not be a financial risk on the state if they're released," Dillard said.

That creates frustration for prisoners who are well behaved, said Lisa Kung, an attorney with the Southern Center for Human Rights, an Atlanta law firm that

represents prisoners. "behalf of the prisoners' behavior, lower conditions," at "turnover" the parole board makes its decision based on "culture and behavior" rather than the "objective criteria" that the long-termers are asking for, she said.

Also, the board is a year behind on hearings for prisoners convicted of violent crimes. The delay stems from a law that requires the board to locate victims before holding hearings.

We demand that the parole board clear their backlog and hear the parole consideration

dates that are costly law. The women wrote \$22.85 a day

The Department of Corrections has asked the state legislature for an extra \$14.9 million next year in anticipation of having to send more inmates probably men, out of state.

Alabama houses about 270 women at the Louisiana prison. Special early paroles for nonviolent inmates helped drop the number below 150 at one time, but it's creeping back up as the state prison population rises. It costs the state \$22.85 a day to house a woman in the Louisiana prison, about \$2.3 million a year based on the current population.

For Richey, the most important part of the platform is the chance to face her victims.

"We cannot demand that our victims forgive us. But we would like the opportunity to present directly to the parole board our real selves and how we have changed through the years," the women wrote. "We believe our obligations are with the victims' families, not professional victim's groups of politicians who use victims for their own gain."

The women hope to gather 500 signatures on their platform as well as support from 15 organizations.

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